Survival Artist
This page intentionally left blank
For Claire, Sabrina, Bronek, David, Evelyn, Juliette, Madan, and Kay
Acknowledgments

To my daughter Sabrina Gail: you are my muse and my inspiration.

To my brother Bronek who has known me ever since my babyhood and without whom this book could not have been written.

To my friends and colleagues Madan M. Vasishta and Fat C. Lam with whom I am continually engaged in noble competition and to whom I owe valuable suggestions.

To the great Arturo Montoya, that other artist, one who has elevated living well into an art without becoming a hedonist.

To my computer and technology gurus Andy Lowe: and Steve and Dot Brenner, a hearty thank you.

Last but not least, kudos to the one and only my wife Claire for her good nature, loving-kindness, and forbearance.
## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments** vii

**Foreword by Leon W. Wells** 1

**Introduction** 3

### I. The End of an Idyll

- *A Foray into History* 11
- *Growing Up in Poznan* 15
- *The Germans Arrive* 30
- *Escape to Lodz, Escape from Lodz* 38

### II. Life in the Warsaw Ghetto

- *From One Ghetto to Another* 42
- *The German Professor* 53
- *My Father the Smuggler* 56
- *The Real and Unreal Worlds* 60
- *Vignettes* 64
- *The Siege and the Escape* 72

### III. Dodging the Predators

- *Rescued by Dadek* 82
- *Fobbing Off the Landlord* 101
- *Mysteries of Mimicry* 104
- *The Ghetto Revolts* 113
- *Forays from the Kitchen into the Jungle* 117
## Table of Contents

IV. From the Uprising to Liberation

- *Saved from Drowning and Shooting*  
  130
- *Inside Insurgent Warsaw*  
  136
- *I Become a Prisoner of War*  
  142
- *My Life Among the Punks*  
  148
- *The Liberation Comes*  
  162

*Afterword*  
  179

*Chapter Notes*  
  189

*Bibliography*  
  191

*Index*  
  193
Foreword

by Leon W. Wells

What I find most personally interesting about this fascinating memoir is the different experience of Eugene Bergman, a survivor from northeastern Poland. I thought that I knew the stories of other survivors in Poland, but it seems I did not. Galicia, where I come from, was the center of Chassidism, the region where the most religious Jews lived. In our house Yiddish was the only language spoken.

Bergman lived in the Western part of Poland, Poznan, near the German border. It seemed to have been completely different there. For example, as much as he claims that his father was religious, his mother spoke only Polish with the children. He also mentions that his whole family was blond-haired and blue-eyed. They did not look like the majority of Jews who had dark hair and dark eyes. These facts kept them from immediately being targeted as Jews and checked to see if the men were circumcised. In his memoir Eugene Bergman tells how his father passes as a Pole, a Christian. The author speaks of being hit with a rifle butt, an event which caused him to become permanently totally deaf.

The family moved from Poznan to Lodz, called Litzmanstadt in German; it is also in western Poland. Mr. Bergman writes that the ghetto there was placed under the reign of a Jewish “dictator,” the elder of the Jews, Chaim Rumkowski, whom the Germans picked as their puppet after they had executed the city’s most prominent Jewish leaders. If the Soviet summer offensive in 1944 had continued, the Jews of Lodz would have survived and Rumkowski would have become a hero. A similar situation was with Horthy, the head of the Hungarian government in 1944 who
tried to protect Hungarian Jews and as a consequence was deposed by Hitler.

He also mentions a German Jewish teacher who died of starvation, cold and abandonment. German and Austrian Jews more often committed suicide than Polish Jews. Also one should notice he says that, among the “Poles, like any other group, there were both swine and good people.” I heartily agree with this philosophy. I was taken into hiding by a Pole who didn’t even know my name. He risked his life and the life of his family had I been discovered.

I read this remarkable book with great interest. It opens new doors to the saga of Holocaust survival.

* * *

Leon W. Wells is the author of five books on the Holocaust, some published in as many as twelve languages.

Author’s Note: For the last few years Leon Weliczker Wells and my brother Bronek have been meeting every Monday for lunch at a diner in Fort Lee, New Jersey, along with a few other Holocaust survivors.

There were eight of them originally. Three who were extermination camp graduates have moved on to another dimension, and a fourth one joined them recently. Of the four remaining ones, Bronek survived the war by impersonating a Pole, Leon by being hidden by a Pole, the third by living in the Soviet Union. The fourth man, who is 88 years old, was in Auschwitz during most of the war and had stopped coming to lunch. Once a month the friends traveled to Bayside, New York, by car to have lunch with him at a local diner near his house, until he became too incapacitated.

So it came about that, when so asked by Bronek, Mr. Wells agreed to read my manuscript and write a foreword for it.

I first met Mr. Wells at Bronek’s eightieth birthday party. This tall elderly gentleman with a pleasant smile looked like a retired engineer (and in fact he was one) but when I learned his name I was awed. He is a former member of the Death Brigade, as recounted in his memoir, The Janowska Road, and he has experienced horrors unimaginable even to a Dante or a Goya.
Introduction

The photograph below shows young people smiling into the camera. They all look so handsome and idealistic, in the bloom of their youth for all eternity. It is a group picture of teenage boys and girls belonging to Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist youth movement in my hometown, Poznan, in the 1930’s. At this writing very few of them are still alive.¹

I have another photograph. It shows a railway carriage with German soldiers leaning out its windows. Alongside the carriage is chalked the caption Wir fahren nach Polen um Juden zu versohlen (We’re going to Poland to rough up Jews).

There were many trains like that going to Poland from Germany in September 1939. I had a photo, no longer extant, of another such train, showing a railway carriage with a banner on which is emblazoned the same slogan. It shows young German civilians laughing and waving from its windows. Perhaps no contrast is more eloquent than this one between the group photo of happy youths dreaming of a bright future and those of sightseeing soldiers and grin-

¹ Teenage boys and girls belonging to Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist youth movement in Poznan, at an outing in the late 1930’s (courtesy Adam Redlich and Noah Lasman).
ning young thugs traveling with their government’s officially sanctioned and avowed aim of beating Jews up.

Some years ago, Hagai Bergman, a relative from Israel, visited me in America. He asked me why it was that his father, David, my cousin, a concentration camp survivor, never spoke to him about his experiences in the concentration camp. I answered, “If you were to be beaten like a dog, humiliated day after day, would you want to talk about it to your children?” He did not answer, of course, but his face grew serious. He understood, all right. Yet here I am, talking about “it” to my children, and to whoever else happens to read this memoir. For one thing, David’s wartime destiny, in its unrelieved steep descent, was much more straightforward than mine with its zigzags. From a life of hunger and deprivation in the Warsaw Ghetto he descended directly into the concentration camp inferno, where he stayed until the war’s end, starved, beaten, worked like a horse, standing in roll calls for hours in rain, snow, and freezing cold.

The remarkable thing about David was his purity. He emerged from the concentration camp with his religious faith intact, and when I met him after the war in Tel Aviv he still observed all the Jewish ritual commandments, and continued to do so until the end of his life. Goodness simply radiated from him, and I never met a more saintly man. That kind of man simply could not do anything that he would feel ashamed of. By the same token, he was an absolutist and, like one, it was as if he expected Hagai and his other children to accept without going into what he thought to be sordid details the fact that his spirit was not broken by his martyrdom. However much I respect his motives, I regret the silence in which he veiled his past, because against the background of such sordid details his spirit would shine even brighter. Yet, he preferred to remain mute about them. As for the details, for example,
he was not the kind who, plagued by hunger, would steal a slice of bread from a starving fellow inmate, or who would curry favor with a kapo by ratting on another man for disobeying one or another fiendish Nazi rule. But this nature’s nobleman did not feel it necessary to explain that to his family or anyone else.

But as for me, I cannot remain mute, at least not on paper since I am what people would call a deafmute. In this memoir I am paying homage to the devotion and self-sacrifice of my parents and brothers who saved my life countless times, and I can do that only by focusing on the details of our everyday life in the war. It was their example that made me determined to survive but not just at any cost. To survive in Hitler’s Europe, in that wartime jungle world, I had to lie and cheat by living a double life, a life on the edge, but, like my family and David, though of course to a much smaller extent, I have not done anything that I could be seriously ashamed of.

Unlike David’s one long agony, the path of my life has been winding through a series of hairbreadth escapes and daily attempts at pretending to be someone else to evade detection and death.

That has been the path of my brother Bronek’s life as well. In some ways, his escapes have been even more hair-raising and his play-acting roles even more diverse. To boot, since he is my older brother and I was only nine when the war began, I have been able to enrich memories of my early childhood in the Poznan part of this memoir with his reminiscences. Owing to his wholehearted cooperation I have been able to flesh out some incidents from my prewar life which I only vaguely remembered.

This memoir is intended to illustrate the fate of not just myself but my family and more broadly the Polish Jewry and its surviving remnant.

Nothing like the Holocaust, this coordinated drive to exterminate a people scientifically, to grind the bones of the victims into fertilizer, render their fat into soap, process their hair into mattress stuffing, and extract gold teeth from corpses with pliers for smelting by the Reichsbank, has happened ever before. “The cruelties mock all norms and principles, they are beyond all limits of human understanding,” as the so-called Ravensbruck Prayer, found on a scrap of wrapping paper in the camp after its liberation, puts it. This terrifyingly consistent policy of scientific carnage and industrialized processing of the corpses of human beings by other beings in death factories is the essence and the mystery of the Holocaust. I still do not understand why it happened. Nobody understands why,
despite all the explanations offered, even though no other event in history has been as thoroughly and widely investigated. It lays bare the atavistic underside of European civilization. Even the photo of those German teenagers excitedly riding a train to bash Jews offers only a partial explanation.

It may be that to this day I still am leading a double life in the sense that my wartime persona now and then looks over the shoulder of my present persona. And when it does, it is usually to warn me about anything that is campy. Note that I am using the kitschy adjective “campy,” instead of the more serious “inauthentic.” After my wartime experiences most of what has happened to me is campy and a bonus.

My personal experiences are recorded here as a series of inchoate sense impressions of a young deaf boy. I have illuminated them in the broader context of the historic events happening around me. Does this mean that I have come to terms with my past after more than sixty years of trying to overcome it, attain closure, and live a so-called normal life? Yes and no.

Perhaps my experience in Martinique will offer a partial answer, with its anticlimactic closure when my bride Claire and I were stopped by a French gendarme.

Claire and I flew for our honeymoon to that French island and there I encountered a poignant reminder of my past. On arriving we checked in at a hotel and arranged to rent a car for the following day to tour the island, including the volcano on top of Mt. Pele. After we left the hotel next morning, we took the highway from Fort-de-France to Mt. Pele, about 20 miles north.

We drove up a serpentine road to the top of Mt. Pele, to stand at the lip of the crater of a volcano whose eruption in 1902 had destroyed the nearby town of Saint-Pierre according to a local brochure. The dark mouth of a dead volcano was not exactly an exciting sight, so, our curiosity slaked, we drove back down that steep series of hairpin turns until we saw a road sign announcing the town of Saint-Pierre, about six kilometers from the crater.

We toured the ruins of that town. According to the brochure, until the volcano’s eruption the mountain was so peaceful that children played on its slopes and families from the environs picnicked on them. Then one day all of a sudden the huge tranquil green hill belched forth flames. The eruption was so quick and unexpected that the torrent of blazing hot gases and rock debris engulfed the town and killed its 30,000 or so inhabitants in a few blinks of an eye.

It was more than just another Pompeii, however, because it had been
preceded by clouds of ash which had already buried nearby communities whose frightened inhabitants flocked en masse to take refuge in Saint-Pierre just before that town itself took a direct hit from the volcano. This last detail reminded me of the Jews from nearby communities who had flocked or been deported to the Warsaw Ghetto to escape death only to perish there.

We walked through the charred ruins of Saint-Pierre and in my mind I compared what had happened there to the Holocaust that engulfed Europe. It was as if nature were completely blind, as blind as justice is supposed to be but much more uncaring. It was as if the same impersonal force of nature caused the cataclysm that razed Saint-Pierre and the holocaust that engulfed millions in its flames.

As we were driving back to our hotel, Claire and I were stopped by a French gendarme who wanted to see my driver’s license. At least that was what I figured, since I could not hear him. I handed him my license and, when he kept talking to me, that is, moving his mouth at me, I gestured at my ears. He raised his eyebrows, surprised to see that I, a deaf man, could be driving a car. Apparently that was a novelty in Martinique. It was funny to see how he raised his eyebrows and looked perplexed. I handed him a pad and a pen, after writing in French that I was deaf, and he wrote me back, asking if I could read lips, and looked even more surprised when I shook my head. Then I asked him why he had stopped us and found that it was because I was not wearing my seatbelt. He let me go since my international driver’s license was valid and I guess he was too dumbfounded to ticket me.

It gave me a kick to engage in silent conversations with people like that. Back in Fort-de-France, we enjoyed a delicious dinner.

Did then my visit to Saint-Pierre put the Holocaust somewhat more in perspective, as another pointless cataclysm of nature? I mean, could it be possible to come to terms with the Holocaust by viewing it as a kind of natural disaster, like a volcanic eruption in Martinique or a catastrophic tsunami that kills thousands of victims in, say, Indonesia? Only in a way, because I, like other survivors, still find it extremely difficult to come to terms with it. Ultimately, I have to reject this natural-disaster analogy. In Saint-Pierre the thousands of victims died mercifully within minutes, if not seconds, while in Europe during World War II the Jews had to endure for years and years the torments of constant humiliation, affronts and chicaneries that sapped their dignity and self-confidence, and gradual
deprivations ending in extinction. One after another, over the months and years, they lost their homes, their occupations and businesses, their material possessions, and kept being browbeaten until they ended up nervous wrecks, beggared, starving, and living in continual hope of salvation and in terror of the inevitable which finally came to pass.

I was no hero. I did not rescue anyone nor fight the Germans during the ghetto uprising or in the forests as a partisan. I exerted no influence on events. Even so, as I see it now, it was not entirely simplistic of me to tell Broniek once in my younger years, “Hitler is dead. I’m alive. I won.” For I did win by dodging the constant perils and not just by merely and passively existing. Survival took being constantly on the alert and actively pre-empting possible snares. This memoir is also focused on describing the subterfuges by which my family and I evaded our ardent executioners.

My having emerged alive from the war was not just because the Germans, damnably thorough as they were, failed to find and kill absolutely every Jew in Europe. It was not just pure luck either, and I was not just a passive object of persecution. To survive in that menacing world of Jew hunters, in which the state was the oppressor and the laws and rules were designed to discriminate against, round up and destroy human beings of a particular “race,” one needed to be on the alert every moment while remaining outwardly calm, to exert strenuous efforts at covering up and overcoming one’s anxiety and pounding heart, to constantly face the terrors with a brave mien. More, even, to brazen them out by acting offended when challenged or questioned.

During the war I had dreamed of the West as a paradise, a world flowing with the milk and honey of human kindness and inhabited by superior human beings who were not tainted by experiences of misery and degradation and who felt empathy and understanding for those tainted by them. To me, in 1944, that paradisiacal world of the future became the West as personified by the carefree Frenchmen playing soccer in a fenced-off section of my prisoner-of-war camp or the elegantly uniformed English officers carrying tennis rackets whom I had seen at a railroad station in Germany, escorted by a German guard who looked and acted more like their batman.

My illusions were shattered, one by one, starting soon after the war in 1946 when American military policemen raided my family’s home at the Zeilsheim displaced persons camp near Frankfurt in search of contraband U.S. foods and cigarettes. They came because my mother was
operating an illegal grocery store inside the apartment, selling herring, vegetables, canned foods, and cigarettes to those camp residents who wanted to use them in bartering with the underfed postwar Germans outside. I saw then that one of these M.P.’s was practically a midget. He could not have been more than five feet tall, but he was wearing a full-sized helmet which made him look comical. Another time, I saw that some of the American servicewomen alighting from a khaki-colored army bus were fat and ugly. So, not all Americans were handsome and had lithe athletic figures.

About a year later, after my arrival in America in 1947, when I was having lunch at a crowded coffee shop in New York City, the questioning expression on the face of a middle-aged man showed me that he was asking my permission to sit down in a vacant chair at my table. I nodded and he sat down. His was a wooden face that seemed incapable of smiling. He had a stiffness of response like that of Buster Keaton, the face of a man who has experienced a personal tragedy. On learning that I was deaf he wrote me how miserable he was because his wife had not spoken to him for years even though they lived in the same house.

I was puzzled as to why he made these confidences to me, a teenager and total stranger. Perhaps because I was deaf and therefore not his equal as he saw it. (It is a response that I encounter and indulgently tolerate in some people.) Above all, these confidences were so foreign to me and my experience. I was puzzled as to how these two people who could not stand each other were able to tolerate living in the same house for so long. But that is another story and another question. So in this brave normal world people too can become emotional and mental wrecks even though they live in a peaceful country that was spared the emotional and mental ravages of war, not to mention the physical devastation. How was that possible? I found this encounter baffling. And to this day I wonder and still feel amazed when I meet with symptoms of lives that are ruined despite the absence of war—dysfunctional families, the birth of a child who is physically or mentally handicapped, people who are damaged even though they have not been exposed to the trauma of war.

I was not without my own mental scars, of course. When I emerged from the Holocaust I found that the lessons I had learned were of no value to me in the so-called peacetime world. To survive in Hitler’s Europe, in that wartime jungle world, I had to learn how to lie, cheat, and be rude. In that world, the laws and rules were inverted, designed to oppress, exploit and ultimately destroy human beings, even and especially children like me.